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ABSTRACT

Since the onset of the nuclear age in 1945, the world has lived with the constant threat of nuclear war and its devastating consequences for all of humanity. While such a threat has led some to "psychic numbing" it has led others to action. Research on how children were being affected by the threat of nuclear war began in the early 1960s. This study explored the impact of parental anti-nuclear activism on children and adolescents with respect to psychic numbing using a post-test only equivalent control group design. The samples included 23 anti-nuclear activist families with 20 fathers, 23 mothers, 17 children (8-12 years), and 15 adolescents (13-19). There were 26 non-activist families with 11 fathers, 20 mothers, 15 children, and 15 adolescents. Separate structured survey questionnaires were prepared for the parents, children and adolescents with somewhat overlapping content, dealing with awareness of the nuclear threat, activism, and the future. The results affirmed the greater awareness of the nuclear threat among activist families which was not totally absent among non-activists. Parents' activism and awareness was reflected well in the children (8-12 years). However, adolescence seemed to be a time when psychic numbing began to appear irrespective of parental activism. Activism as an adaptive coping mechanism and the need for creative intervention to prevent psychic numbing among adolescents are discussed. (Author/ABL)

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Parental Anti-nuclear Activism and Children's Response to the Nuclear Threat

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Abstract

The study explored the impact of parental anti-nuclear activism on children and adolescents with respect to psychic numbing using a post-test only equivalent control group design. The samples included 23 anti-nuclear activist families with 20 fathers, 23 mothers, 17 children (8-12 years), and 15 adolescents (13-19 years). There were 26 non-activist families with 11 fathers, 20 mothers, 15 children,and 15 adolescents. The two samples were comparable in socio-economic level, education, age and importance of religion. Most activist families were located by the snowball method among members of Beyond War and SANE and were interviewed at home. Non-activist parents and thier children and adolescents were surveyed separately in small groups during Sunday school sessions at Lutheren congregations. All data were collected during March and April of 1986. Separate structured survey questionnaires were prepared for the parents, children and adolescents with somewhat overlaping content. The contents essentially dealt with awareness of the nuclear threat, activism and the future. The results affirm the greater awareness of the nuclear threat among activist families which was not totally absent among non-activists. Parents' activism and awareness was reflected well in the children (8-12 years).However, adolescence seemed to be a time when indications of psychic numbing began to appear irrespective of parental activism. Activism as an adaptive coping mechanism and the need for creative intervention to prevent psychic numbing among adolescents were discussed.

Parental Anti-nuclear Activism and Children's Response to the Nuclear Threat

Since the onset of the nuclear age in 1945, the world has lived with the constant threat of nuclear war and its devastating consequences for all of humanity (Kramer, Kalich & Milburn, 1983). While such a threat has lead some to "psychic numbing" it has lead others to action (Lifton, 1982). Understanding the developmental aspects of the awareness of this threat is a significant step in our ability to cope with it as a global community (Eisenbud, Van Horn & Gould, 1986).

Research on how children were being effected by the threat of nuclear war began in the early 1960's soon after the 1961 Berlin and 1962 Cuban missile crisis. In a 1961 study (Schwebel, 1965) demonstrated that almost 50% of the students surveyed expected unclear war and responded with expressions of anger, resentment and helplessness. Escalon's (1965) early study also showed that 70% of 311 children surveyed between the ages of 10-17 spontaneously mentioned issues of war. About three decades later Beardslee and Mack (1982) conducted an exploratory survey with three samples of over eleven hundred high school students across the country and showed that there was a great deal of awareness coupled with fearful images of nuclear destruction and concern for the future. Expanding on this research Goodman, Mack, Beardslee & Snow (1983) found that students revealed feelings of fear, helplessness and sadness about the possibility of nuclear war, as well as anger toward adults who seemed unconcerned. Furthermore, Goldenring and Doctor (1983) questioned over 900 junior high and high school students in two major California cities concerning their worries in general. They found that out of a list of 20 worries, "nuclear war" was the third most often mentioned after "parents dying" and "bad grades". The results also showed that those who were most concerned (about one-third) had scores that showed greater maturity, self esteem and a greater awareness of other potential environmental dangers.

There is evidence to suggest that children's fears of the nuclear threat is effecting their outlook on life in terms of greater fatalism (Borgenicht, 1983), a sense of futurelessness, escapism through space and technology, a tendency to turn to religious cults, increased use of drugs and alcoholism, and increased tendency for suicide (Gittleson, 1982). However, parents are known to play an important role in shaping the outlook children develop (Beardslee & Mack, 1982; Escalona, 1982; Wrightsman, 1970; Tolley, 1973).

According to social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1963) through the modeling of appropriate coping skills parents can help children develop adaptive and constructive outlook towards the threat of nuclear war and life in general. One such modeling behavior on the part of parents is openly addressing and talking about anxieties and fears related to the nuclear threat as a family. Rubin (cited in Eisenbud et al.,1986) suggests that when families talk about their nuclear fears and anxieties parents are better able to meet children's needs, a greater sense of closeness develops among family members (Zeitlin, 1984), and children acquire a more optimistic outlook on life and the possible prevention of nuclear war (Van Hoorn & French, 1984). In another context studies dealing with pathological symptoms and coping skills among children under the unpredictable threat of shalling and personal injury in Lebanon (Der-Karabetian, 1985) and Israel (Ziv & Israeli, 1973) have demonstrated the role of adaptive and self-protective behavioral modeling of parents in retarding physical and behavioral sypmptoms of anxiety. Furthermore, Yudkin (1984) has indicated that when parents are actively involved in preventing nuclear war, children tend to be more hopeful about the future. However, It is not clear at what age the process of psychic numbing begins, and whether parental activism can be a preventive measure.

The purpose of the present study is to explore the impact of parental anti-nuclear activism on children and adolescents with respect to psychic numbing. A post-test-only equivalent control group design is used. Findings are generally expected to suggest that children and adolescents from activist families are more aware of the threat, directly and vicariously share in their parents' activism, and tend to have an optimistic outlook about the future and the prevention of nuclear war. Children and adolescents from non-activist parents are expected to be less aware and threatened by nuclear war, but express optimism about the future suggestive of a psychic numbing process.

Method

Subjects

As Table 1 shows the sample included 23 anti-nuclear activist families with 20 fathers and 23 mothers who were involved with Beyond War or SANE. There were 26 non-activist families with 11 fathers and 20 mothers who were members of three Lutheran congregations. The two samples were comparable in socio-economic level, education, age range and importance of religion. More anti-nuclear activists reported being politically more active in general. All adults sampled were employed and lived in Orange and Los Angeles counties of Southern California.

The activist families yielded 17 children (8-12 years) and 15 adolescents (13-19 years). The non-activists yielded 15 children and 15 adolescents.

Most of the activists were located by the snowball method and interviewed at home using structured surveys. The non-activist parents and children were surveyed separately in small groups during Sunday school sessions. In both groups several families were surveyed by mail. All data were collected during March and April of 1986.

Insert Table 1 about here

Questionnaires

Separate questionnaires were prepared for the parents, children and adolescents. The parents' questionnaire included demographic information, activism items, attitudes toward nuclear war adopted from Oskamp, King, Burn, Konrad, Pollard &White (1985), a knowledge scale (Kierulff & Zippin, 1985), a 16-item measure of world-mindedness derived from Sampson and Smith (1957), and items concerning information and talking to children about nuclear war taken from Van Hoorn and French (1984). The questionnaires for the children and the adolescents were comparable and dealt with personal interests, school future, friends, leisure, awareness of the nuclear threat as well as other social and global issues and ratings of concerns and worries adopted from Goldenring and Doctor (1984).

Results and Discussion

Since the sample sizes are quite small and their selection is non-random the generalization of the results should be made cautiously if not altogether avoided. With this in mind essentially descriptive statistics are used in the presentation of the results and the discussions.

Nuclear concerns of activist and non-activist parents

In order to establish the differences between the activist and non-activist parents their nuclear concerns and worries were compared (Table 2). The activist

Insert Table 2 about here

parents tended to be more knowledgeable concerning the threat of nuclear war and reported thinking about nuclear war more often; 86 percent thinking daily or weekily compared to the 23 percent of the non-activist group. When asked to indicate the three out of eight problems in the world they worry about most, 91 percent of the activists compared to 52 percent of the non-activists reported nuclear war. Terrorism was the problem that concerned non-activist parents most (58 percent). Activist parents tended to feel that there was a greater liklihood of nuclear war

within 25-30 years (Median=50%) than non-activists (Median=30%), and saw a smaller chance of personal survival if one occured (Median=0%) compared to non-activists (Median=10%). Although there were differences in perceived risk, great majority of both parents questioned reported that nuclear threat never interferred with their goals and aspirations.However, 30 percent of activists compared to only 10 percent of non-activists indicated that it occasionally or frequently did so.

The nature and extend of the interference experienced by the parents were not examined in this study, but it certainly would be a rewarding effort. If there is such a disorder as "nuclear neurosis" it will probably be found in this group of adults, and more certainly among non-activists. Such interference would clearly be disruptive and distressing. Being an activist may be an adaptive response to regain control of ones life and destiny through the act of reactance (Brehm, 1966). In fact, as a group the activist parents were more optimistic (91 percent) than the non-activists (61 percent) concerning the likly elimination of the nuclear threat. On the part of the activist parents the three cognitive elements of greater perceived nuclear threat, activism against the threat and optimism about its elimination form a consistent cluster (Festinger, 1957), and result in a less distressing state of mind.

In the case of the non-activist adults one could alsosee a consistent cluster of cognitive elements characteristic of psychic numbing. There is a lesser perception of threat and a greater willingness to accept its continuous presence. A lesser threat is certainly easier to live with but represents a distortion of the actual magnitude and imminence of the threat.

The two parent groups were also found to be different on world-mindedness,

with activist parents scoring higher. World-mindedness is essentially a value orientation and aframe of mind that allows someone to go beyond local, regional and national concerns to perceive the world as a total system as well as feel a sense of affiliation with the whole of humanity (Glick, 1974). It may be fair to say that anti-nuclear activism and world-minded orientation reinforce each other. Activism may be as much a consequence of world-mindedness as world-mindedness a consequence of activism. This is consistent with findings in a multi-national study by Der-Karabetian (1987) on world-mindedness, activism and perceived threat. The desire to eliminate the nuclear threat around the world could be seen as a superordinate goal (Sherif & Sherif, 1953) that can enhance a sense of solidarity with people everywhere.

Another distinctive feature in the two samples is the parents' concern of their children. As shown in Table 3, about half of the activist parents report frequently discussing nuclear war with children to none in the non-activist group. However, close to two-thirds of the non-activist parents report occasionally bringing up the subject.

Besides more of the activist parents talking about nuclear war with their children, more of them (79 percent) compared to non-activists (39 percent)

Insert Table 3 about here

feel that their children are affected by the nuclear threat. It is important to note that a substantial number of the non-activist parents are aware of some undesirable consequence of the nuclear threat on their children. There is overwhelming consensus in both groups that the home is the place where children should have initial nuclear issues contact.

In summary, the comparison of activist and non-activist parents has shown that while the two groups are demographically similar, on nuclear issues activist parents are more aware and knowledgeable about the threat, have a greater world-minded orientation, talk to their children about the nuclear threat more often, and perceive a greater impact of the threat on their children. It is important, however, to underline that the perception of the threat and concern about the children is not totally absent among the non-activist parents.

Adolescents' awareness of nuclear issues

As Table 4 shows most adolescents in both groups report getting along well with their parents most of the time. They also indicate having heard about the nuclear threat from variety of sources including parents. More of the activist adolescents (67 percent) report having thought about the nuclear threat often than non-activist adolescents (33 percent).

Insert Table 4 about here

On the one hand, the two groups of adolescents are in substantial consensus about the likelihood of nuclear war in their lifetime, and the magnitude of destruction in case one occurs. On the other hand, no activist adolescents are optimistic about the survival of their families in case of a nuclear war compared to the 33 percent of adolescents in the non-activist group, indicating greater perceived threat by the activist group.

In spontaneous listing of three top concerns (Table 5) personal concerns were predominant as expected, but more activist adolescents mentioned issues of war and peace. Moreover, in the rating of a list of 20 items developed by Goldenring and Doctor (1984) there was a remarkable similarity in the two groups in the expression of their concerns, and were in close agreement with the responses of the normative group of over nine-hundred adolescents (Table 6). Both the

activist and the non-activist adolescents rated nuclear war as their number one worry. The top five included worries such as own death, parent dying, starvation in the world,and getting bad grades, with getting hooked on drugs as the least of all the worries.

Insert Tables 5 and 6 about here

It is apparent that adolescents from activist and non-activist families are quite similar in their exposure to and awareness of the nuclear threat. From Table 4 it is also striking to note that 87 percent of adolescents in each sample report no influence of the threat of nuclear war on future plans and show a similar pattern of long range planning.

One item where there is a noticable difference concerns envisioning peace in their lifetime with. While 40 percent of non-activists and 53 percent of activists report expecting peace in their lifetime, about half of the non-activists respond with uncertainty, reflecting greater skepticism about a peaceful future.

Thus, the adolescents from activist and non-activist families resemble each other closely in terms of their awareness of the nuclear threat, and the absence of its influence on their future. This duality of expecting nuclear war and continuing to plan for the future is an illustration of the "double life" Lifton (1982) has talked about, which may be taken as a reflection of the start of a psychic numbing and denial process.

Children's awareness of nuclear issues

The responses of the children to nuclear issues from activist and non-actvist families are summarized in Table 7. More activist children report their parents worrying about nuclear war, but over half the non-activist children report the same. These are comparable to the percentage of parents in the two groups who

put nuclear war with the three most crucial problems facing the world, and indicate discussing nuclear war with their children. However, only 31 percent of activist children and 13 percent of non-activist children report having heard about nuclear war from their parents. Not withstanding the issue of the reliability of children's responses, it appears that children are quite aware of their parents' concerns about nuclear war. Moreover, 75 percent of activist children and only 20 percent of non-activist children report talking with parents about nuclear war.

There is clearly a greater interaction between parents and children in the activist families concerning the dangers of nuclear war. All the activist children and about half the non-activist children indicate having thought about nuclear war. Also, more activist children report nuclear war being an important problem facing the world.

Unlike the discrepancy in the reported awareness of the nuclear threat the two groups of children are not much different in their perception of the nuclear threat. To a question concerning their and their families possible survival in case of nuclear war, about half of each group responded positively. Although the children in the activist and non-activist families do not feel differentially threatened, more of the activist children (88 percent) indicate "doing things together with their parents to solve todays world problems."

Insert Table 7 about here

In response to an open-ended question to idicate what kind of things do they do, children from activist families gave more responses with peace-and-war content. Some examples are, "We think of things to help war, like convincing the president to join Beyond War," "I stay home, help my parents with my sister while they are at Beyond War meetings." There is clear indication that the children

identify with and participate in their parents' activism.

One unexpected finding was the greater playing of war games by activist children, nearly 70 percent compared to the 40 percent of the non-activist children. On the surface this appears inconsistent with anti-war activism. However, one may speculate about the value of playing war games as a possible coping mechanism to reduce the anxiety produced by the nuclear threat. The role of fantasy in dealing with disturbing situations is well recognized among children. Acting out the threat of destruction with no actual harmful consequences may in fact ease the pain and anxiety accompanying the threat. Such fantasy combined with realistic action to reduce or eliminate nuclear war would optimally enhance a sense of empowerment and control.

Concluding remarks

The results of this study, although limited, clearly affirm the greater awareness of the nuclear threat among activist parents and their children. The phenomenon of psychic numbing is apparent in the non-activist parents and adolescents irrespective of parental activism. In line with descriptions of psychic numbing by Carey (1982), Lifton (1982), and Sandman and Valenti (1986) they are aware and concerned about the nuclear threat but are inactive or continue to plan for the future.

Differential awareness and activism among the parents are well reflected in the children's responses consistent with Escalona's(1982) assertion that what impresses and arouses the adults also impresses the children. Activist children are aware of the nuclear threat, and directly or vicariously experience the activism modeled by their parents. However, greater sensitization to the threat by adolescents does not seem to lead to concerns about the future. Differences between the children and the adolescents point to the importance of developmental issues of perception and cognition in consciousness raising. More urgently, creative strategies are needed to prevent the numbing tendencies in adolescence.

Table 1: Demographic information on anti-nuclear activist and non-activist parents

	Non-Activist n = 31		Activist n = 43	
	%	n	%	n
Sample				
Families		26		23
Mothers		20		20
Fathers		11		23
Children		15		16
Adolescents		15		15
Education				
High School	10	3	0	0
Some College	52	16	18	8
College	19	6	27	12
Graduate Work	16	5	37	16
No Answer	3	1	16	7
Importance of Religion				
Not Important	0	0	0	0
Somewhat Important	3	1	13	6
Important	48	15	20	9
Very Important	45	14	47	20
No Answer	3	1	18	8
Membership In Social/Political Organizations				
Yes	19	6	95	41
No	81	25	5	2
Written or Called Elected Officials				
Yes	61	19	81	35
No	39	12	7	3
No Answer	0	0	12	5

Table 2: Nuclear concerns of anti-nuclear activist non-activist parents

	Non-activist n = 31		Activist n = 43	
	%	n	%	n
Knowledge of Nuclear Threat (Correct Responses)				
1. How many countries have nuclear weapons(6 or more)?	67	21	84	36
2. Do you Know how SDI works?	55	17	84	36
3. Number of explosions needed to make nuclear winter(1-100).	71	22	79	34
4. How many Posiedon subs can destroy every large city in the USSR(one) ?	39	12	51	22
How often do you think of nuclear war ?				
Daily/Weekly	23	7	86	37
Monthly	16	5	7	3
Rarely/Never	58	18	7	3
Three most crucial world problems				
Homeless	26	8	16	7
Overpopulation	16	5	21	9
*Nuclear war	52	16	91	39
Hunger	42	13	26	11
Economy	26	8	23	10
Pollution	35	11	51	22
Terrorism	58	18	23	10
Unemployment	16	5	19	8
Nuclear Threat interfere with goals and aspirations				
Never	87	27	70	30
Occasionally	10	3	25	11
Frequently	0	0	5	2
No Answer	3	1	0	0
Likelihood of nuclear war in 25 - 30 years				
Median	30		50	
Likelihood of personal survival after nuclear war				
Median	10		0	

Table 2: (Continued)

	Non-activist n = 31		Activist n = 43	
	%	n	%	n
Likelihood threat of nuclear war can be eliminated				
Likely	61	19	91	39
Unlikely	26	8	7	3
No Answer	13	4	2	1
Worldmindedness (16 item Sampson and Smith)				
Mean (Higher is more)		55.43		66,27
S.D.		6.80		10.65
Alpha = .78				
$t = 5.34$ $p < .001$				

Table 3: Anti-nuclear activist and non-activist parents' concerns of their children.

	Non-activist n = 31		Activist n = 43	
	%	n	%	n
Discuss nuclear war with children				
Never	32	10	5	2
Occasionally	65	20	47	20
Frequently	0	0	49	21
No Answer	3	1	0	0
Do you think your children are affected by nuclear threat ?				
None	23	7	0	0
Little	35	11	19	8
Somewhat	39	12	56	24
Great Deal	0	0	23	10
No Answer	3	1	2	1
Where Should children have initial nuclear issue contact (more than one checked)				
Home	77	24	88	38
School	16	7	19	8
Church	0	0	2	1

Table 4: Nuclear awareness issues by adolescents from anti-nuclear activist and non-activist parents.

	Adolescent Non-activists n = 15		Adolescent Activists n = 15	
	%	n	%	n
Get along with parents				
Sometimes	14	2	20	3
Most of the time	73	11	67	10
Always	14	2	13	2
How far ahead have made definite plans ?				
Through next year	33	5	20	3
2 -10 years	53	8	47	7
Beyond 10 years	21	3	33	5
Where have you heard about nuclear war ?				
Parents	60	9	93	14
Teachers	60	9	73	11
T. V.	93	14	73	11
Printed media	73	11	67	10
Has threat of nuclear war influenced future plans ?				
A lot	0	0	7	1
A little	13	2	7	1
Not at all	87	13	87	13
Thought about nuclear war				
Often	33	5	67	10
Few times	67	10	33	5
Likelyhood of nuclear war within your lifetime				
Likely	67	10	67	10
Unlikely	33	5	33	5
If nuclear war occurs will you and family live				
Yes	33	5	0	0
No	67	10	100	15
If nuclear war occurs				
Thousands will die	7	1	0	0
Millions will die	73	11	73	11
Don't know	20	3	27	4
Envision peace in your lifetime				
Yes	40	6	53	8
No	13	2	33	5
Don't know	47	7	13	2

Table 5: Nuclear related worries of adolescents from anti-nuclear activist and non-activist parents.

	Adolescent Non-activist n = 15		Adolescent Activist n = 15	
	%	n	%	n
Spontaneous listing of 3 top concerns	(42 Responses)		(55 Responses)	
Death and bodily harm	10	4	9	5
Personal concerns	57	24	36	20
External/environmental	19	8	29	16
Issues of war and peace	14	6	25	14

Table 6: Rank and mean ratings of a list of 20 worries by adolescents from anti-nuclear activist and non-activist families as well as a normative adolescent sample collected by Goldenring,J.M., et al.(1984).

Worries	Mean Norm n = 913	Mean Activist n = 15	Mean Non-Activist n = 15	Rank Norm n = 913	Rank Activist n = 15	Rank Non-Activist n = 15
Getting cancer	2.00*	1.79	1.88	15.5 **	15	12.5
Earthquakes	2.06	1.86	1.76	14	13	15
Getting hooked on drugs	1.70	1.57	1.29	20	20	20
People not liking you	2.08	1.93	2.06	13	8	10
Not being able to find a job some day	2.47	1.86	2.12	7	13	8.5
Having to move somewhere new	1.83	1.77	1.53	19	16	17
Getting(or making someone) Pregnant	1.91	1.86	1.41	17.5	12	19
Nuclear war	2.69	3.29	2.94	3	1	1
Looking ugly	2.10	1.86	2.00	12	13	11
Parents divorcing	1.91	1.64	1.47	17.5	18	18
Pollution	2.19	2.00	2.29	11	7	6.5
Being a victim of a violent crime	2.52	1.64	1.88	5	18	12.5
Parent dying	3.16	2.85	2.41	1	2	4.5
Nuclear power plant leaking	2.29	1.86	2.29	9.5	13	6.5
Your own death	2.41	2.14	2.47	8	5	3
World over-population	2.00	1.92	1.65	15.5	9	16
Becoming very sick or crippled	2.63	2.07	1.82	4	6	14
Your family not having enough money	2.29	1.64	2.12	9.5	18	8.5
People starving in the world	2.51	2.78	2.82	6	3	2
Getting bad grades	2.95	2.21	2.41	2	4	4.5

* On a four-point scale, 4 = very worried

Table 7: Nuclear awareness issues by children from anti-nuclear activist and non-activist parents.

	Children Non-activist n = 15		Children Activist n = 16	
	%	n	%	n
Hours of T. V. Mean	6.2 hours		4.3 hours	
Play war games				
Yes	40	6	69	11
No	60	9	31	5
Problems facing world	(29 Responses)		(32 Responses)	
Nuclear war	20	6	47	15
Hungry/homeless	28	8	31	10
People being murdered	25	7	13	4
Other	28	8	9	3
Do things to solve todays problems				
Yes	40	6	88	14
No	60	9	12	2
Thought about nuclear war				
Yes	47	7	100	16
No	53	8	0	0
Talked with parents about nuclear war				
Yes	20	3	75	12
No	80	12	25	4
Parents worry about nuclear war				
Yes	53	8	88	14
No	47	7	12	2
Where have heard about nuclear war				
Parents	13	2	31	5
Teachers	25	4	19	3
Other	60	9	50	8
Survive a nuclear war				
Yes	47	7	56	9
No	53	8	44	7